Expressions of Time in Sign Language

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Introduction

• This talk will explore the nature of temporal expressions by sign language users – distinguishing different ways time manifests itself in signed narratives.

Time – abstract, non-visual, non-tangible concept
Sign languages – delivered in a visual, spatial and kinetic modality

• How signers express the concept of time can inform our understanding of the relationship between language and thought.
Evans (2004)

- Time is fundamentally subjective and of internal origin – difficult to conceptualise and verbalise.
- So we think and talk about time in terms of motion in space – a more tangible concept of external origin.

*e.g. Christmas is approaching; More information nearer the day*
Question 1

• Does this mean that sign language users (who express their thoughts in concrete images and motions) will actively map temporal events into spatial relations?

Answer(s): ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, or ‘Depends…’?
Standard TIME IS SPACE metaphors

• In established lexicon, temporal information is embedded in relation to ‘time lines’ (Frishberg and Gough 1973).

• A time line is an imaginary line that runs through the body, back to front, representing the passage of the time.

  e.g.
  YESTERDAY, TOMORROW,
  LAST-YEAR, NEXT-WEEK,
  DEADLINE-APPROACHING
Question 2

• Time line metaphors are no doubt common in sign languages, but not ‘the’ only way to express time.

• What are the other ways to represent time?

• ‘Experiment’ – We asked four Deaf poets to create a poem under the theme of ‘time’
Four poets on ‘Time’

- John Wilson: *Time*
- Paul Scott: *Time*
- Richard Carter: *Time, The Race*
- Donna Williams: *Time, Time Traveller*

+ A joint poem by Paul Scott and Richard Carter: *Fashion Times*

(All poems are available for view at [www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/bslpoetryanthology))
Findings

• Standard TIME IS SPACE metaphors are rarely used in these poems, in which they are explicitly talking about time.

• Instead, we find more examples of metonymy and manipulation of signing speed in exploring temporal themes.
Metaphorical representations of time

- TIME IS SPACE metaphors are used, but not extensively, and not simply by front-back time lines.
Metonymic representations of time

• More common in ‘time’ poems
• Time is expressed through associated objects such as clock, wristwatch and sandglass, life events such as cradle (birth) and grave (death), or fashions associated with particular periods of time.
Question 3

• Why are there fewer examples of metaphorical expressions of time in poems that directly talk about time?
Discussions

• **Time as an underlying theme**
  (people tell a story which involves the notion of time)
  → representation of temporal information is embodied and metaphorically expressed exploiting the standard TIME IS SPACE metaphors

• **Time as a topic of its own right**
  (people are overtly talking about time)
  → the concept of time is foregrounded and exists independently of a signer, and thus is no longer embodied through metaphorical expressions.
Signing speed as expressions of time

- Signers also manipulate their signing speed as a means of iconically or metaphorically representing the notion of the passing of time.
- They can map common temporal notions such as ‘protracted duration’ or ‘temporal compression’ (Evans 2004, Evans and Green 2007).
- This can be done either internally (time perceived by internal characters) or externally (adding cinematographic effects).
Signing speed

• Is it iconic or symbolic?
• Is it internal or external to the story?
• What is the duration of the original event?
• Does it interact with the story? (i.e. Do signers make a metalinguistic use of the signing speed?)
Conclusion

• There are at least three different ways of expressing the abstract concept of time in sign languages: metaphorical, metonymic, and through manipulation of signing speed.

• In established signs, conventional TIME IS SPACE metaphors are represented through time lines.

• When time becomes the direct target of poetic discourse, fewer embodied metaphors are observed, and time is referred to by metonymic signs.

• Signers also control their signing speed to iconically and metaphorically represent the perception of time.


Acknowledgement

• AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK)
• Deaf poets (Paul Scott, Richard Carter, Donna Williams, John Wilson)
• Donna West

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